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EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS AND GOALS FOR ADOLESCENTS WHO ARE BLACK AND IN CARE: INSIGHTS FROM YOUTH, CAREGIVERS, AND CHILD WELFARE STAFF IN ONTARIO, CANADA

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Abstract: It is well established in the literature that Black children and youth-in-care are disproportionately overrepresented in Ontario's child welfare system. Additionally, Black youth experience structural challenges with the education system. However, there is a lack of Canadian literature that explores the educational experiences of Black children while receiving child welfare services. This study examined the reports of youth, child welfare staff, and caregivers on the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care. In-depth interviews exploring the educational needs and goals of Black youth-in-care were conducted with 13 participants (3 child welfare staff, 6 caregivers, and 4 youth). Findings highlight that Black youth-in-care experience labelling, hypervisibility and invisibility, and harassment and bullying, all of which had an impact on how they navigated the school system, and contributed to internalized stereotypes and feelings of isolation and unbelonging. The findings also identify strategies for innovation and promoting the educational success of Black youth-in-care.

Keywords: Black children and youth, youth-in-care, child welfare, foster care, education

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Extant literature acknowledges the significant overrepresentation of Black children and youth in Canada's child welfare system (Cénat et al., 2021; Clarke, 2011). These research findings are also confirmed by the 2022 report of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Further, the disproportionality of Black children in the Canadian child welfare system is noted by the report from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2018), *Interrupted childhoods: Over-representation of Indigenous and Black children in Ontario child welfare.* In Ontario, where our study was completed, the statistical reporting of the overrepresentation of Black children-in-care varies. In 2014, Contenta et al. reported that a "provincial survey of about 7,000 Ontario children who have been in care for more than one year shows that about 12 per cent are of African or Caribbean descent. Meanwhile, only about 5 per cent of Ontario's children under age 18 are from those communities" (para. 32). In 2020, the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada noted that, in Ontario, "although Black children make up just four per cent of the overall child population, they represent 30 per cent of kids living in government care" (McMurtry, 2020, para. 2). Ontario and Quebec are the two Canadian provinces with the highest proportions of the national population of Black children at 52.4% and 26.6% respectively (Statistics Canada, 2019); studies in both Ontario and Quebec have documented the overrepresentation of this subgroup in the child welfare system (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020). In their longitudinal jurisdictional study of Black children who had been reported to child protection services in Quebec, Boatswain-Kyte et al. (2020) noted that Black children were only 9% of the general Quebec population in 2011, yet made up 24% of children receiving child protection services in that period. They also found that "when compared to White children, Black children's protection reports were five times more likely to be screened in, substantiated, and brought to court. Black children were also five times more likely than White children to enter out-of-home placement" (Boatswain-Kyte et al. 2020, p. 1).

This study sought to address the following research question: What are youth, child welfare staff, and caregivers reporting on the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care[1]? We also aimed at understanding how child protection services provide support to Black children-in-care with regard to educational achievement. In Canada, each of the 13 jurisdictions (10 provinces and 3 territories) separately plan, organize, and manage their education programs (Guerriero et al., 2015); similarly, all 13 Canadian jurisdictions have their own child protection legislation.

Canadian research has shown that Black youth have challenges navigating the educational system in Ontario (James, 2015). These challenges are heightened for Black youth-in-care, as noted by Goodman and Johnson (2017) and Goodman et al. (2018). The latter observed that, within school contexts, racialized youth face a "double whammy stigma" (p. 70) of being a foster child and having a minoritized identity. Gharabaghi (2011) reported that children and youth-in-care are one of the most educationally vulnerable groups due to factors like frequent placement changes.

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[1] We use the terms *Black children* or *Black youth* but recognize the heterogenous nature of these groups based on varied lived experiences, histories, cultures, religious beliefs, class, gender, and other social identities.

Kovarikova's (2017) exploratory literature review found that "every time a youth moves, they lose four to six months of academic progress and then struggle to make up the loss over time" (p. 9). This instability in placement not only affects education but also social relationships and causes behavioural and attachment issues (Gharabaghi, 2011).

Black students in general are more likely to be identified as having academic limitations and assigned individualized education plans (IEPs; Turner et al., 2020). Low high-school graduation rates, high suspension rates, and high expulsion rates also are not uncommon for Black youth (James & Turner, 2017). Black youth are more often encouraged and directed toward attending college rather than university, resulting in them being placed in applied and non-academic classes based on the school streaming system (Anucha et al., 2017). Reports from Ontario suggest that Black youth are among the most at risk in terms of disengagement from school[2] (Edwards & Parada, 2023; James & Turner, 2017). James and Turner (2017) highlighted racial differences in the educational outcomes of Black students based on Toronto District School Board student census data. Within a 2006 to 2011 high school cohort, they found that 84% of White students but only 69% of Black students graduated at the end of the fifth year. With regard to suspensions, the same study found that Black students were more than twice as likely to be suspended at least once in comparison to White and other racialized counterparts. Findings from Glogowski and Rakoff's 2019 literature review on challenges and barriers that Black students face in Canada suggest that mistrust and low expectations hinder their academic engagement and success, and thus their future employment opportunities. Nevertheless, there is a lack of Canadian literature on the educational experiences of Black children while receiving child welfare services (Lane & Head, 2021).

Beyond the Canadian context, studies highlight various issues affecting Black students. For example, U.S. literature shows that Black students have typically been seen from a deficit perspective (Kurtz et al., 2021), and there is limited funding for schools and districts with predominantly Black students (Phillips, 2022). In the United Kingdom, Byfield and Talburt (2020) have noted the educational underachievement of Black boys and their disengagement from schools. However, access to education for all children has been declared a basic need by the United Nations and its Sustainable Development Goals (Kurtz et al., 2021). It is this call for "access to education for all" that prompted us to critically examine the schooling experiences of Black youth-in-care in Ontario. In doing so, we are building on the recently released Ontario anti-Black racism strategy, which aims to reduce the overrepresentation of Black youth within the child welfare system, the achievement gaps between Black students and all other students within the publicly funded education system, and the disproportionate numbers of Black males involved in criminal justice systems (Government of Ontario, 2017; Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2020). We aimed to generate different understandings of the educational needs and goals for Black youth-in-care and to raise awareness of opportunities to enhance services that cater to their school experiences.

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[2] It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous youth are at higher risk due to the underfunding of education in their communities and ongoing legacies of intergenerational trauma (Layton, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

Most youth in foster care have experienced trauma, including the trauma of being removed from their families (Ai et al., 2013). While trauma knows no racial boundaries (Clarke et al., 2018), we took into consideration that race can add another layer of traumatic experiences for Black youth-in-care. As a result, we applied a race-informed trauma lens to understand the experiences of education for Black youth-in-care. Existing literature draws associations between race and trauma (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019; Kinouani, 2020; Mosley et al., 2021), arguing that racial discrimination can result in psychological, emotional, and physical injury. We also considered that racial trauma is cumulative, based on Kinouani's (2020) idea that "it can be passed from one generation to the next, so that family or community/group members without direct experience of the traumatic agent come to experience its effects years, or decades, if not centuries later" (p. 154). Our primary objective in adopting a race-informed trauma lens was to seek practice insights that agencies, staff, and caregivers can utilize to better respond to the strengths and needs of Black youth-in-care.

In day-to-day practice, prioritizing racial trauma as a service need in child welfare has been suggested by Clarke et al. (2018). One method of dealing with trauma is to create for clients — the youth — a space to engage in story-making around their experiences of oppression (Mosley et al., 2021). Without considering trauma and its impacts, it is possible to misunderstand and misinterpret the behavioural and emotional difficulties that youth-in-care experience and present (Collin-Vézina et al., 2011). Collin-Vézina et al. (2011) added that trauma is understudied in youth-in-care because of the challenges of gathering data from them and the inaccessibility of biological relatives who might be able to provide a more fulsome understanding of the family's experiences and history. Herein, we integrate the voices of Black youth, child welfare staff, and caregivers to fill some of the knowledge gaps around the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care.

Methodology

This research received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. Additionally, the Senior Leadership Team at our partnering child welfare agency approved this study.

The research adopted a case study methodological approach, using a single child welfare agency in Southwestern Ontario to collect data through in-depth interviews with Black youth-in-care, child welfare staff, and caregivers. The child welfare agency research advisory committee was instrumental in promoting the research and helping identify and recruit study participants. Where appropriate, the research team also used the snowball method or word of mouth to invite potential participants to be interviewed.

Data Gathering

We conducted 12 in-depth interviews with a total of 13 participants: Black youth-in-care (*n* = 4), children's service staff (*n* = 3), and caregivers (*n* = 6), as shown below in Table 1. A sample size of 12 to16 individual interviews is considered acceptable in qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2016). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted either online via Zoom or by telephone between November 2020 and February 2021. All Zoom interviews were password-protected.

The selection criteria for the three cohorts were as follows: the youth cohort had to be 14 years and older, have a history of being in foster care, and self-identify as Black. The child welfare staff and caregivers cohorts had to have experience and a history of working with, caring for, and supporting Black children-in-care. An assent form (for youth) or a consent form (for staff and caregivers) was sent to all participants and reviewed prior to the virtual and telephone interviews. All interviews were conducted at a time chosen by participants as being convenient for them. During the interviews, which lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, we asked open-ended questions about the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care. Each participant received an honorarium etransfer of $50 to thank them for their time and willingness to participate in the study.

Participants

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Characteristic	Youth (*n* = 4)	Staff (*n* = 3)	Caregivers (*n* = 6)
Gender			
Female	3	3	5
Male	1	0	1*
Age range (years)	14–21	25–49	35–50+
Highest level of education	Elementary	Post-degree or graduate program	Elementary to degree program
Average years in care	5	NA	NA
Average # of placements	3.7 (range 2–6)	NA	NA
Years of experience	NA	11–20	5–21+

* Interviewed as part of a foster mother and father couple.

The first interviews that we conducted were with the four Black youth-in-care, who were between the ages of 14 and 21 at the time of the interview. Three of the participants were female and one was male. The second set of interviews were with three female child welfare staff, two of whom identified as White and one as racialized. The third set of interviews were with caregivers who had experience with, or were currently fostering, Black youth-in-care. Five of these interviews were conducted with six participants, four with female caregivers and one with a foster mother and father couple. Four of the caregivers self-identified as Black and two as White. Each participant self-selected pseudonyms or allowed the researchers to give them a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. For anonymity, the four youth participants are reported in the findings as

Pharaoh, Joanne, Maya, and K; the three child welfare staff as Vivian, Grace, and Lana; and the six caregivers as Oney, Pipi, Neri, Susan, and Mr. and Mrs. C (the couple).

Data Analysis

The data analysis involved three steps:

1. Once interview transcripts were transcribed, organized, and sorted, we shared the transcripts with the participants, giving them an opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy and to remove any information they did not want included. This step was taken to ensure research rigour.
2. We read and reread the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data. We then independently coded the transcripts by cohort, beginning with the youth interviews, followed by caregivers, and then staff.
3. The data were imported into NVivo to systematically organize the relevant references or quotations into codes to assist with the advanced data analysis (Creswell, 2007). We generated a total of 16 codes (e.g., networks in and out of school to support Black youth-in-care, greater awareness about racism in the school system, importance of accessible and quality early childhood education). Using regular Zoom meetings, we examined and re-examined these codes to not only ensure what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as processes of research rigour but also to identify patterns and areas of similarity. These were collapsed into five themes, which are discussed in the Findings section below: (1) *labelling educational challenges of Black youth as behavioural*; (2) *hypervisibility and invisibility*; (3) *harassment and bullyin*g; (4) *cumulative impacts*; and (5) *strategies to promote scholastic success*.

Findings

The study sought to explore and understand divergent perspectives on the educational experiences of Black youth-in-care in Ontario. Based on the perspectives and experiences of Black youth-in-care as well as caregivers and staff who provided services to this demographic, findings highlighted the various challenges and barriers that Black youth-in-care encounter as they navigate school systems, as well as how they cope with, manage, and overcome these obstacles.

Theme 1: Labelling Educational Challenges of Black Youth as Behavioural

When Black youth encountered educational challenges at school, they were often inappropriately labelled as simply having behavioural difficulties; this was a key challenge that youth, caregivers, and child welfare staff had to navigate. Participants indicated to us that school administration and staff failed to recognize or understand the unique challenges facing Black youth-in-care. It can be inferred that many of the difficulties that manifested at school are not simply behavioural, but are rooted in complex trauma histories tied to ongoing legacies of anti-

Black racism, as well as the cognitive, emotional, psychological, and social stressors that disporportionally affect the academic performance of youth-in-care.

For example, one youth told us he dealt with his social anxiety by acting out — by throwing chairs and desks or getting into fights with his teachers and peers. As a result, he was labelled as having behavioural issues, and an episode of acting out usually ended with him getting suspended. However, during the interview, he was able to make the connection that whenever he acted out at school, it was usually because he was experiencing life challenges, including his admission to the foster system:

> I have a breakdown, I would throw chairs and desks around, and they [would] send me home.… I think it was because I always felt like I was special ed. I felt people treating me different… and I'll get pissed off but… I felt like maybe I didn't have enough friends or they were treating me differently and… that would build up inside of me and I would just go crazy… And instead of talking about it, like verbally, I would just physically show I'm pissed off.… That started back when I first got into the system. (Pharaoh — youth)

The school administration and staff did not acknowledge or recognize these issues as being rooted in his experiences as a Black youth-in-care. This sentiment was echoed by two other child welfare staff, who remarked that there are very likely other reasons beyond behavioural issues that play a role in these students' academic engagement and performance:

> Some of my Black youth-in-care are identified within the system.… An example is wanting to identify one of my youth as a behavioural IEP rather than an academic and truly there are no behaviours that I would have labelled. So really being cognizant of what that's going to do for that youth moving forward. (Vivian — staff)

> Even the two that did graduate — one has severe mental health, and the other one has a non-verbal learning disability. So, I definitely think that those play a role.… I think that too often they were viewed in different ways by teachers, and it took a lot of advocacy to get a diagnosis so they weren't just viewed as lazy or not engaged or not wanting to be at school. (Grace — staff)

The female youth participants talked about some of the challenges they experienced when it came to seeking help, including being afraid to admit that they needed help because of what people might think:

> The fear was they would think I'm stupid and I didn't want anyone thinking that way of me… it's the idea of people thinking that… I don't want people thinking that I don't understand what I'm doing. (K — youth)

K's fear of being labelled was not unfounded. One of the caregivers talked about how a Black youth was assessed and given an IEP diagnosing her as being developmentally delayed:

> Now, my child here is a special child. She was given an IEP. So in understanding what the IEP is, and after seeing the child and doing my own assessment — not that I am a clinical person for an IEP program, but I could tell you… she doesn't have that. I think she was labelled because of not knowing her. So obviously, she don't have that stability… she don't have that guardianship to really help support her. So she doesn't need that IEP… this doesn't make sense. I told the teachers too during conferences as well… I know there are issues there… some trauma I must say, 'cause this child was living in a concentration camp in [their home] country. (Oney — caregiver)

In recognizing the trauma history of this youth, the caregiver was able to work closely with her on her academic studies to the point where she was performing well in school and exploring post-secondary and career options to become a social services worker.

Theme 2: Hypervisibility and Invisibility

When navigating the school system as Black, all four youth highlighted the ways that both their hypervisibility and invisibility subjected them to daily emotional tensions and racial microaggressions at school, including feeling judged based on their skin colour, receiving stares, racial jokes and epithets, feeling uncomfortable, and being the only Black person in predominantly White schools and neighbourhoods. Several of these examples were voiced by participants:

> It's the students… you can just tell because they're giving me dirty looks. And they don't say it directly to me, but they give their looks… Yeah, it's really hard. (Joanne — youth)

> I walk down the halls, girls will look at me… at how I braid my hair and make comments like, 'Oh, you're not Black'… They don't really include you… in groups and stuff. (Maya — youth)

Adjusting to new school settings where they often felt they were the only ones left Black youth feeling distrustful and with a sense of unbelonging:

> I went to a really diverse school all my life… I just moved to… a really small rural city… So, moving here was really hard because… I've been surrounded by people with different cultures and different beliefs and backgrounds. (Joanne — youth)

The issue of hypervisibility and invisibility described by the youth participants attending schools that lacked diversity was also recognized by both child welfare staff and caregivers, who shared their perspectives and insights:

> Three of my Black youth were placed in really small towns. So figuring out how to find your space in a town that is probably like 99% White… Even if you are the most studious person navigating that and trying to find community would be really hard. (Grace — staff)

Caregivers also highlighted the lack of representation at the schools they attended as a major concern, in terms of both student diversity and having very few adults that looked like them. Neri, a caregiver stated: “We don’t have enough Black teachers in the system.” Another caregiver added:

> I try to include them in activities that have other Black children in them, and I have a few friends that are Black, and we try to get together. We were not as aware as much of the need for him to reach out to other children with the same race as him. And the biggest [thing] lacking was he didn’t have a male, Black male, to look up to… a role model. (Pipi — caregiver)

While Black youth-in-care are hypervisible in predominantly white communities, they simultaneously experience invisibility due to Black representation being virtually nonexistent among their teachers and peers, and in the curriculum. As highlighted in the quotations, this lack of representation, and more specifically of their experiences as Black youth-in-care, can result in a lack of awareness and understanding that leaves them feeling misunderstood, unseen, and unheard; in other words, feeling invisible.

Theme 3: Harassment and Bullying

As part of their hypervisibility and invisibility as Black youth-in-care in predominantly White schools and neighbourhoods, the youth we spoke with talked about how they encountered ongoing bullying and harassment in the form of microaggressions, discrimination, and racism. Participants shared experiences of being subjected to these hurtful and harmful behaviours by their peers and even teachers: having to manage and cope with the negative impacts of being bullied and harassed undoubtedly affected their academic success:

> A lot of kids make fun of me because I’m in care… They just don’t understand… I [also] hang out with girls [who] are White at school… and they’ll all be like, I’m whitewashed… It makes me feel bad about myself… I usually cry to my mom about it… I don’t want to go to school… And then she’s like, “Oh, it’s fine.” (Maya — youth)

Some of the students did not understand the reasons why they were being picked on by their peers. While discussing bullying and harassment, K shared how she was bullied for “no reason”. She further explained, “The person that was bullying me never came up to me and told me why they were bullying me. I guess they just decided, let me just bully her." Although K did raise her concerns about bullying with teachers and the principal, she felt that the school's response did not adequately address her problems, which left her feeling unsafe at school:

> They [the school] didn't do anything about it.… There was that one point where I went to the office… I just told them I didn't feel safe around her and then they said they will do something about it. So, I remember I went out for lunch… and they [bullies] were following me… that's when I knew I was unsafe. (K — youth)

This was reinforced by staff and caregivers. As Lana, a staff member, noted, "A lot of our youth experience some bullying; they don't have a sense of belonging in their community." Pipi, a caregiver, talked about a youth she had cared for being picked on: "He did have a lot of fights at school… some of them just didn't like his colour and he was picked on for that."

Theme 4: Cumulative Impacts

These daily microaggressions had a major impact on Black kids at school, particularly when it intersected with issues of gender and being in care. To some extent, all the youth internalized the stereotypes projected on to them, leaving them feeling isolated and alienated, and with a sense of unbelonging, impacting their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. One youth reported:

> I struggle with… trying to connect with other people… the best way I can put it is, I might be physically in a first world country, but mentally I'm like in a third world country. I'm always putting myself down mentally.… I don't know how that develops. I think it's just from a young age … I always had a hard time trying to connect… to talk to people or trying to go up and make friends… so, I kind of just stay by myself where it's kind of like I'm protected.… I think my biggest fear is the judgement … I won't trust anybody ever again. So, to protect myself I… don't allow myself to really try to connect with somebody because I don't wanna get hurt or the friendship to end. So I just don't open myself up there at all in the first place. (Pharaoh — youth)

Joanne, another youth stated:

> You don't want to be judged off your skin colour… especially at school where you go every single day… it's supposed to be fun… nobody wants to be judged just based off of what they look like or their religion or their cultural beliefs.

When asked what types of judgements others are making about her skin colour, Joanne replied, "that I'm a bad person… that I'm lazy or I don't care about my education". While she recognized that these were "stereotypes about Black people", she too had internalized these messages and feared her White peers were making similar assumptions about her, due not only to her race but also to being in care. At different points in her educational journey, Joanne believed and accepted these stereotypes; however, she was going through her own internal process of working past them with support from some foster parents and child welfare staff who were helping her to realize they were not true. Instead, they encouraged her to fight through these stereotypes and focus on working towards her educational dreams.

The youth also talked about the emotional and psychological toll that it takes on them to constantly be navigating a field of microaggressions at school in the effort to simply be included and feel a sense of belonging. Maya noted:

> I don’t want to be at that school and… I’ve had to say that so many times, and I’ve had so many issues happen… I don’t feel like I’m wanted.… They [workers] should support me in that and move me to a school where they know that I’ll feel included and not judged.… They should address it, and even if I can’t switch schools, then help me find ways to cope… ’cause I don’t have ways to cope in it.

Pharaoh added:

> I spend a lot of my time in my room. So behind four walls, you start to get in your head a lot. You just live there a lot… you start to think a lot about life and people and everything like that.

Judgements and stereotypes not only impact students’ sense of self, but also their educational achievements and aspirations. K told us, “The bullies… really drained me down a lot. And I didn’t like school because of them. So I’d be afraid to go to school.” Similarly, Joanne said, “I’m more focused on what they [peers] think about me than actually doing my [school] work.… So it’s harder, it’s hard for me to really focus.”

As youth navigating the school system, our participants expressed distrust that schools and school administrators would help them. Because of this distrust, they tended not to report adverse interactions, such as those involving microaggressions, racism, and sexism. In one situation, a youth recalled an experience in class when a teacher made a racist joke:

> I had a teacher last year when I was asking for help, she made a comment that she wasn’t gonna help me because she wanted to make me work like a slave… then I said, “What did you say?” and she [said] that it was a joke. (Maya — youth)

Elaborating on how this experience had affected her, Maya explained, “I was angry. I asked her why and she was just saying that it was a joke. I said that’s not a joke, you don’t say that. And she was like, well, I was just having fun.”

Child welfare staff also offered insights about youth’s distrust of school staff and administration. They felt this distrust often stemmed from limited knowledge or awareness on the part of teachers and school officials regarding the complex and intersecting issues that Black youth-in-care encounter in the school system. Commenting on the school's failure to respond adequately to the educational needs of youth, Grace, a staff participant added:

> I look at so many of our youth and I think, they're Black youth, they're youth-in-care; they're already sort of labelled in certain ways, and it takes a lot of work to shift the thinking.… I don't think there's enough understanding within the schools about the impact of being in care, but also… being a Black youth on top of [having other identities].

Although many of these negative experiences of Black youth-in-care were affirmed by child welfare staff who had cared for them, youth participants said that they were often left to deal with them in isolation, because they did not feel comfortable talking to either their caregivers or child welfare staff. Consequently, youth participants did not always reach out to caregivers, staff, or the school about the challenges they were encountering. At some point throughout their educational journal, all the youth felt they were not adequately equipped to navigate the school system, although they were able to identify areas where they required supports for issues they were encountering at school, such as changing schools, adjusting to a new neighbourhood, and meeting new friends. Some youth stated that when they raised concerns with trusted adults, they were often dismissed, ignored, or not believed, which contributed to distrust and even disengagement. Still, youth also spoke of positive experiences of being supported in navigating the school system, which had contributed to their academic success. This is discussed under the final theme that follows.

Theme 5: Strategies To Promote Academic Success

Given all the difficulties and struggles that the youth experienced in navigating the school system as Black youth-in-care, participants identified several strategies that they felt promoted academic success. The youth we spoke to had high educational aspirations for themselves, with big hopes and dreams for the future, from becoming a clothing designer to pursuing careers in helping professions like nursing and social work. Therefore, supporting the academic hopes, dreams, and passions of youth by having high academic expectations of them is paramount. Maya stated:

> I have my worker who always encourages me to try my best… and I know that she believes in me that I can do it.… I have my family and friends, and I have some teachers at school that tell me that I'll go far.

Youth required additional supports from school staff and administration, caregivers, and child welfare staff to help them achieve their goals by developing concrete and realistic plans.

Participants spoke about practical strategies that could easily be implemented to promote their educational success, such as:

a) Student-centred learning: “I struggle a lot with that, academically, I’m more of a more visual learner… I needed somebody to like… do it on the chalkboard, you’re not just like handing me books.” (Pharaoh);
b) Reducing course loads: “I like the way school is now. Obviously, not because of COVID, but… my marks are better because it’s one class. I don’t have four classes I need to worry about. So it’s like, a less stressor” (Maya);
c) Asking questions throughout the semester about what’s happening at school and regularly checking in with them: “Just asking me questions through the quadmester[3] about what’s going on in school. ’Cause when you’re in a home and your parents are not asking you about what’s going on, it’s not motivational to do the work” (K); and
d) Providing incentives and rewards: “getting a reward for growth” (K), and “I had this one teacher and she would come and to make things easier… if I finished something, they would reward me… they’d give me stuff, like take me out to lunch and stuff like that” (Pharaoh).

Lana, a staff member, called for “placing higher expectations on our Black African Canadian youth”:

> Sometimes that buy-in, that unconscious trajectory, is already created for those kids, like this is as good as it’s gonna get for them so I’m not gonna try harder to expect more from them. When we build them up and we tell them they’re capable and that they’re worthy of that extra [bit] more or advocating for themselves and speaking up, that makes a huge difference for them.

Another staff member, Grace, added that agencies must be more consistent about ensuring placement stability for children:

> One [youth] has moved a lot but has maintained school as their sort of anchor… they can focus on and succeed at [school]. Another one stayed put for a long time. And then the other two who didn’t finish high school moved all the time. Constant, constant movement.

The impact of being uprooted to a new school with limited representation and a culture based on Eurocentric, middle-class norms left students feeling alienated. Staff suggested that these impacts could be prevented by considering placement options beforehand and, if possible, trying to keep them in the neighbourhoods and schools they feel comfortable with, that may already have supports in place. Staff participants also spoke to institutional and structural constraints, such as where foster families live and lack of racialized caregivers. Lana stated:

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[3] A four-semester school system was implemented during the pandemic but has now been phased out.

> The ones [youth] that are more successful [academically] are the ones that still have contact with family, who have that extra person to fall back on. They're not just raised by the system but there are other people in their life who are supports that they can rely on. That's why it's so important to maintain that contact from relationships for those children and youth.

Grace commented on the need for youth to feel comfortable in their schools and communities:

> I think sometimes we underestimate… the need to fit in as a teenager… the need for community within school. Do they have teachers of colour? Do they have other students of colour?… Are there cultural services?... Are there churches that are the same religion as their family? We don't often understand why that plays such a big role for our youth and their success at school.

When discussing placement stability, Susan, a caregiver, noted:

> And when we talked to her about moving, we gave her the choice to come with us or not when we were moving. I'm like, if you come with us, you have to change schools, you have to change districts, you're gonna have to make new friends… or you can choose to stay with what you know, and then move foster homes, because I didn't want to force her into anything she wasn't comfortable with.

Another strategy that was critical in promoting academic success was that caregivers must be involved and know what is going on in youths' school lives. One example was taking the time to help students with completing their homework:

> My husband… was the one to help them [foster kids] with the homework and they seemed to do well… and he would help them with the homework and make sure that they get their homework done. (Mr. & Mrs. C — caregivers)

Other caregivers noted the value of being involved and knowing what is going on in each other's lives:

> I am heavily involved in my foster child as well as my own children's life as well. So we talk about her day and what goes on and how is school and also their goals… in doing SMART goals, it's to find out what are their strengths and also get them to make decisions for themselves as to where do they see themselves at the end of high school. (Oney — caregiver)

Additionally, being empathetic to youths' situations and advocating for them helped promote their academic success. Neri, a caregiver, stated, "Kids are coming to care, it's a trauma. So if we have a school principal or teacher that's not empathetic to that child, it just makes matters worse. And that's why I advocate for kids because it's difficult."

One of the proposed strategies was to identify and involve positive role models in youths' lives to listen, encourage, and uplift them — providing the emotional and educational supports needed to help them succeed. Participants mentioned the importance of Black (and racialized) teachers, child welfare staff, and caregivers that Black youth-in-care can relate to. The youth participants spoke about feeling they could better relate to Black teachers who may have similar or shared experiences that would allow them to better understand what Black students were going through without them having to explain.

> I think it's very good even if it's in the school as well, to build a Black community… I think it would be good in the school, like build a club for Black youth who are in foster care… but just something like that would be nice. (K)
>
> It would be easier for the Black student to come talk to the Black teacher because maybe the Black teacher has experienced something similar as the Black student. (Joanne)
>
> I had this one teacher… in grade 9, but I still talk to her all the time. She knows that I'm in care. She knows my struggles with being a mixed girl… she just says that me being in care shouldn't stop me from achieving what I want to do… It makes me feel good, and it actually makes me believe that I can do more than I think I can. (Maya)

Oney, a Black caregiver, concurred with the youth on this point:

> Culture means a lot because we relate differently. We relate to each other different. So if it's a culture for Black, mentorship is very important. Mentors that they're comfortable to work with.

The study findings showed that child welfare staff and caregivers can support the youth in building their internal strengths and capacities to succeed academically. While it cannot negate the systemic and structural racism that youth encounter, adult support can help them in building intrapersonal skills to find ways of coping with these difficulties. This was clearly identified in this study as an area of need.

Discussion

This study's findings show the areas of strengths and areas of vulnerability that Black youth-in-care experience in terms of their education. Some of the youth were in schools that were less diverse, which led to feelings of isolation, lack of representation, and not being accepted within these settings, all of which could negatively impact their academic success. Despite these challenges, the youth we talked to shared that they had academic and career dreams and hopes. In their attempts to support the aspirations of Black youth in their care, child welfare staff and caregivers faced the dilemma of raising racialized children in school systems where they encounter such educational challenges as high suspension rates, a sense of unbelonging, high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and so on (James & Turner, 2017).

The study provided some understanding of the distrust felt by the youth participants, which can be a barrier to them seeking assistance when faced with challenges in their schooling experiences. Their cynicism and scepticism should be understood and contextualized based on the ideas put forth by Mosley et al. (2021), who explained that youth who have experienced racial trauma begin to distrust the dominant society. Our findings suggest that race is a critically important consideration for youth-in-care. For example, Lana, an child welfare staff member, alluded to the ways that White teachers discriminate against Black children in the school system and excuse themselves by saying that they are not "used to teaching or working with children with different diverse cultures; there is… lack of understanding of that child's experience. Sometimes… I hear from the youth that… the teachers are also making a lot of comments or inappropriate messages." One method of coping with anti-Black racism and racial trauma as Mosely et al. (2021) found, was distancing oneself from Whiteness, which can manifest as disbelieving or becoming ambivalent to, or even outright disregarding, the messages imparted by White teachers, which often reflect racial biases. Using a race-informed trauma lens can increase one's knowledge of these youths' needs and lead to the better resources and supports that are needed for cultural and racial understanding. Cénat et al. (2021) called for increased awareness among Ontario child welfare practitioners about issues of race and racism.

Within schooling and caring contexts, fostering and rebuilding trust can be done through various forms and strategies, including what the youth told us in this study: listening to them; asking them questions about their learning and lived experiences; acknowledging their milestones (school graduations); not shying away from conversations of race and racism; showing kindness; and having positive role models. In this study, all the staff acknowledged the poor educational outcomes among Black children and youth-in-care, and the need to better address their academic struggles by understanding what these schooling challenges look like and what supports are needed. Some staff emphasized the need for youth to have a sense of belonging and representation within school contexts in order to help them feel understood, and to feel that they do not have to explain their experiences in detail because the other person is likely to have similar lived experiences.

Caregivers also noted the importance of being engaged with the schools that Black children and youth-in-care attend. Such caregiver engagement with schools could be in the form of following up with teachers, advocacy on behalf of the child, and giving youth the tools to manage school challenges that will better support their learning. Literature focusing on the academic needs of youth-in-care emphasizes that not only school professionals, but also carers (child welfare staff and caregivers), should be knowledgeable about how to best guide and support children throughout their education, particularly at key junctures (Mannay et al., 2017). In our view, the list of key junctures would include elementary school completion, high school course selection, high school graduation, post-secondary applications, and so on. Role models can play a significant role in these key stages of schooling to foster academic success for youth-in-care. Together, carers, school professionals, and role models can constitute a strong foundational base of support, experience, and knowledge that can be drawn upon by youth-in-care to be able to effectively manage and navigate the transitions from elementary to high school to post-secondary (Mannay et al., 2017).

Along with this knowledge resource, many of the participants (youth, staff, and caregivers) in our study noted the importance of placing higher academic expectations on Black children and youth-in-care, which is key to building their self-esteem, confidence, and schooling potential. This finding is congruent with scholarly literature that emphasizes the need for all professionals involved with youth-in-care to focus on their educational goals (Kufeldt et al., 2006; Kufeldt et al., 2000). For example, Kufeldt et al. (2000) stated, "There are indications in the literature that educational needs are not only low priority but may be affected by low expectations of children in care" (pp. 31–32). In addition, Anucha et al. (2017) have identified the silencing and willful blindness toward Black students' realities within the educational system, advocating that these harmful practices must stop in order to take critical steps towards racial equality. Of relevance to child welfare workers, these authors also noted the need to expand Black youth's notions of what is possible in their education and careers in order to tackle the structural violence of low expectations of what Black youth are capable of achieving (Anucha et al., 2017).

Limitations

The most noteworthy limitation of this study is that the findings only represent the voices of some youth, child welfare staff, and caregivers of one Ontario child welfare agency and do not represent the experiences of everyone affiliated with the agency or of other child welfare organizations. However, to fill this gap and strengthen this work, we have critically analyzed the study findings against relevant academic and grey literature to understand whether the results are consistent with previous research. We also compared stories by youth, child welfare workers, and caregivers to understand the similarities and consistencies within their narratives.

Recommendations

We also need to recognize that, within this subpopulation of youth-in-care, our inclusion criteria focused on the aspect of race; however, future research should consider the diverse and intersecting marginalities within this subpopulation — diverse language, gender, abilities, and sexual identities — and their experiences of navigating school systems while in foster care. Strategies to effectively manage and resist school-related challenges of discrimination and the associated trauma need to be closely examined. Additionally, future research should include Francophone participants.

The participants had several recommendations about what needs to change in order to better support Black youth-in-care's educational growth and development. In this study, we became aware that youth are often dealing with challenges long before they reveal them to adults and that they would like their concerns to be taken seriously rather than minimized or dismissed. Youth expressed a desire to engage in conversations about their educational struggles, but only when adults demonstrate a genuine willingness to listen and understand their concerns. The youth valued and trusted adults who expressed and showed understanding and genuine empathy. From workers and caregivers, there was a level of awareness of the trauma experienced by children and youth when they come into care and that a lack of empathy made it worse for them. They also recognized that empathy was not enough and therefore made several suggestions to improve services and promote academic success for youth.

Some recommended future directions of research in this area are to continue to contextualize experiences of Black children and youth-in-care from a race and trauma informed framework within the interlocking systems or institutions they encounter, including, but not limited to, education, family, social, and cultural systems, and the justice system.

Research Conclusions

This study adds to the limited research on the qualitative experiences of Black youth-in-care in Canada, and the caregivers and child welfare staff who work with them (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Lane & Head, 2021). In recognizing the importance of including voices of youth and those working with Black youth-in-care, this study contributes to building knowledge in this understudied area to improve programs, practices, and policies to support academic success for youth-in-care. Multiple studies have reported the existence of trauma among children- and youth-in-care (Balsells et al., 2015; Clarke, 2011; Harris and Skyles, 2008; Kikulwe et al., 2021). We also paid heed to the cumulative disadvantages of the intersections of race and being in care, as well as the resulting trauma. When youth are removed from their families, they experience multiple losses including disrupted relationships with parents, siblings, and friends, in addition to disconnections from their communities and schools. These losses are traumatic and their impacts cannot be minimized in analyses of the factors that are at play and influence the academic achievement of Black youth-in-care.

Our results showed that Black youth-in-care experienced labelling, hypervisibility and invisibility, as well as harassment and bullying, which all impacted how they navigated schooling as some of them internalized the stereotypes that were applied to them, leaving them feeling isolated and with a sense of unbelonging. The findings also demonstrated strategies that can be adapted to promote educational success for youth-in-care.

This study expands the profession's knowledge about the educational pursuits and goals of Black adolescents-in-care by centring the voices of youth and learning from their lived experiences and insights alongside caregiver perspectives including foster parents and child services staff that have served Black children and youth in Ontario's child welfare system. By focusing on one agency, we gained a deeper and more holistic understanding from multiple perspectives within this particular context, which we hope can offer insights to others operating in similar child welfare contexts.

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